

More Arizonans riding, dying on motorcycles

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A near-death experience with an inattentive driver convinced Carl Kubitz that he should park his motorcycle for good.

Kubitz was riding his Harley-Davidson Fat Boy on an errand in his Scottsdale neighborhood when a station wagon pulled out of a parking lot directly in front of him. He narrowly missed the car with a desperate maneuver.

Then, he rode home and stuck his motorcycle in the garage.

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"That was about two years ago, and I haven't ridden it since," said Kubitz, a 50-year-old chief executive of a Scottsdale software company. "I don't feel safe riding anymore."

Other drivers just don't pay attention to motorcycles, he said, and the final near-miss was only the latest incident with a distracted driver who didn't see his motorcycle coming down the road.

Motorcycle-crash fatalities have risen sharply in Arizona, with 146 riders and passengers killed during 2005. That compares with 118 deaths in 2004 and 75 in 2001, according to statistics from AAA Arizona and the state Motor Vehicle Division.

Most of the mayhem is blamed on car and truck drivers who fail to notice motorcycles and make left turns in front of them or pull out of driveways without seeing them coming.

"Motorists are still clueless when it comes to sharing the road with motorcycles," said Yvette Lopez of AAA Arizona. "The majority of accidents are caused by motorists who are not paying attention."

The rise in fatalities corresponds with the soaring popularity of motorcycles, with part of the ridership increase attributed to high gasoline prices. Arizona registrations rose to 124,438 in fiscal 2006 from 77,000 in fiscal 2001, according to the MVD. The 2006 figure is a one-year increase of nearly 17,000 over fiscal 2005.

In Maricopa County, motorcycle registrations shot up to 63,567 in fiscal 2006 from 54,766 in fiscal 2005.

"There are more people riding motorcycles today, while streets are becoming more and more congested," said Detective Walter Olsen of the Phoenix police's Traffic Education and Safety Unit. "If you put more cars and more motorcycles on the road, there will be more people killed."

Police also affected

The rise in motorcycle deaths has been a sobering experience for Phoenix police, as well. Of the 31 officers who have died in the line of duty, seven were motorcycle officers, Olsen said.

Nationally, fatalities for motorcyclists have risen steadily from 1997, when 2,116 people died, to 2004, with 4,008 killed, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. National figures for 2005 are projected at 4,315.

Motorcycles make up 2.4 percent of all registered vehicles in the United States and only 0.3 percent of all vehicle miles traveled. Yet they made up 9.4 percent of all traffic fatalities in 2004, according to the traffic safety agency.

In a 2004 study, the Arizona MVD found that among 2,653 motorcycle crashes, 1,458 were with cars or trucks. In 39 percent of those cases, no fault was found on the part of the motorcyclist. That doesn't show how high a percentage of crashes were due to inattention by the other driver, which experts say is the majority.

Dangerous environment

"The environment for the motorcyclist is becoming more and more dangerous," Olsen said. "With more people on cellphones and iPods and everything, you have to wonder how many of the motorcycle fatalities are because the car driver is distracted."

Another factor is the number of inexperienced riders who buy high-performance sport bikes they are ill-equipped to handle.

"We constantly harp on them about overriding their abilities," Olsen said. "We have young riders who buy these incredible machines that can do 200 miles per hour, and they wind up hurting themselves."

Kubitz said he is disappointed with the direction motorcycling has taken.

"That takes the joy out of it," he said. "I had noticed several incidents where people were not paying attention to me as a rider, and it kind of left me uneasy."

"I rode motorcycles as a kid, but we lived in the country. The most trouble you could get into was something you did foolishly yourself."